

Message Text

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PAGE 01 MEXICO 04650 071503Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MEXICO 4650

E.O. 11652 GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MX, CU

SUBJECT: CUBA - VIEWS OF MEXICO'S AMBASSADOR TO CUBA

1. MEXICAN AMBASSADOR TO CUBA, VICTOR MALDONADO, CALLED ON ME AS AN OLD FRIEND AND FORMER COLLEAGUE IN HONDURAS AND MADE THE FOLLOWING POINTS ON MEXICAN/CUBAN RELATIONS AND THE SITUATION IN CUBA.

A. MEXICAN/CUBAN RELATIONS HAD BEEN AT A LOW POINT SOME FIVE YEARS AGO WHEN HE WAS ASSIGNED THERE AND HE HAD FOUND A VERY UN-FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE DURING THE FIRST YEAR OR SO OF HIS TOUR. HIS INSTRUCTIONS HAD BEEN TO IMPROVE RELATIONS AND OVER A PERIOD OF TIME THIS HAD OCCURRED IN WHAT HE CONSIDERS AN IMPRESSIVE MANNER. HE NOW HAS ACCESS TO CASTRO AND THE PRINCIPAL CUBAN OFFICIALS; SEVERAL MEXICAN MINISTERS AND SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE VISITED HAVANA AS HAVE ALL OF PRESIDENT ECHEVERRIA'S CHILDREN, AND VARIOUS CUBAN HIGH OFFICIALS HAVE VISITED MEXICO.

B. MEXICAN TRADE WITH CUBA HAS IMPROVED ALTHOUGH IT IS STILL VERY MINOR, IN PART BECAUSE MEXICO HAS HAD TO CUT BACK EXPORTS OF BEANS AND OTHER FOODSTUFFS WHICH IT NEEDS ITSELF. A FURTHER BOTTLENECK LIES IN SHIPPING, AS MEXICAN SHIPS WHICH CALL AT CUBA

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PAGE 02 MEXICO 04650 071503Z

ARE "SANCTIONED" BY THE U.S.

C. BECAUSE OF THE EXTRAORDINARILY HIGH PRICE OF SUGAR IN WORLD MARKETS, CUBA'S ECONOMIC SITUATION HAS IMPROVED AND IT IS NOW A RELATIVELY BRISK CUSTOMER FOR IMPORTED COMMODITIES AND WOULD HAVE EVEN MORE TO SPEND WERE IT NOT SO HEAVILY COMMITTED TO TRADE WITH COMMUNIST COUNTRIES. THIS HAS NOT BEEN REFLECTED IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE CUBAN PEOPLE AS THEY ARE STILL HARD UP AND ON RELATIVELY STRICT RATIONS, ALTHOUGH BETTER OFF THAN A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO. MALDONADO SPOKE WITH AWE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CUBAN SHIPPING INDUSTRY WHICH WAS ONLY BRIGHT SPOT IN FOOD PICTURE AS IT NOW PROVIDES A RELATIVELY ADEQUATE INPUT OF FISH TO THE CUBAN DIET.

D. HE SAID HE HAS NOTICED A CHANGE OF ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES, BUT IN A MORE PRO FORMA MANNER, AND HE FEELS THAT CUBANS ARE NOW READY TO TAKE STEPS TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS WITH THE REST OF THE HEMISPHERE AND WITH THE U.S. ALSO.

E. AS REGARDS A POSSIBILITY THAT ECHEVERRIA MIGHT VISIT HAVANA, MALDONADO SAID THAT THIS IS NOT IN THE CARDS FOR THE NEXT FEW MONTHS. IT WAS POSSIBLE, HOWEVER, THAT LATER IN THE YEAR OR EARLY NEXT YEAR ECHEVERRIA WOULD VISIT HAVANA BUT ONLY AS PART OF A TOUR OF THE CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES, WHICH WOULD INCLUDE JAMAICA, BARBADOS, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC AND HAITI AS WELL AS CUBA IN ORDER TO MAKE THE VISIT TO CUBA LESS OSTENTATIOUS. THIS WAS THE SAME SYSTEM HE HAD FOLLOWED IN EUROPE, MIXING VISITS TO COMMUNIST AND NON-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES.

2. COMMENT: MALDONADO WAS RETURNING TO CUBA THE FOLLOWING DAY HAVING SPENT SEVERAL WEEKS HERE FOR MEDICAL ATTENTION. WHILE NOT THE MOST BRILLIANT OF DIPLOMATS, IN HONDURAS HE PROFESSED TO BE FRIENDLY TO THE U.S. AND HE ECHOED SIMILAR SENTIMENTS DURING HIS CALL HERE.

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